

Making a Statement in Durban

By Salih Booker

Some 200 nations are gathered in Durban, South Africa from August 31 to September 7 for the UN World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). Unfortunately, America's official conduct leading up to the conference has not been its finest hour. Rather than deal with its own sorry legacy of slavery, discrimination, and racism, the Bush administration has chosen at the highest level to deny that historical matters and redress have any place on the agenda. It has withheld support and threatened to stay home.

Bush only decided to send a delegation after gaining some concessions in language about the Middle East and about reparations for slavery and the slave trade. But just days before the beginning of the conference the State Department announced that Secretary of State Colin Powell would not attend, and that possibly a low-level delegation would go instead.

Every country in the world should participate in the WCAR at the highest possible level, as befits a world summit on an issue as serious and important as this. The U.S. in particular should have participated at the highest level and should have provided general financial support for the conference because the U.S. is historically the greatest beneficiary of the crimes that were justified by racism. And the U.S. is the world's richest country as a result.

U.S. threats to boycott the racism summit represent the height of arrogance, and a callous dismissal of one of the greatest problems facing the U.S. and the world today. The conference, however, is going on and in many ways is already a success. WCAR signifies the growth of an international movement for global justice that recognizes the centrality of addressing racism. Ironically, U.S. opposition to reparations for slavery has assured that this subject will be discussed by the conferees, the media, and interested citizens around the world.

It is important this historic world summit on racism focus on four points. One is a declaration that the slave trade and the enslavement of Africans were crimes against humanity. Two, the right to reparations for slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and continuing racism. Three, the cancellation of Africa's external debts. And four, the full financing for the global fund for HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.

Why focus on these four issues? The first two points relate to the need to acknowledge history and to accept that reparations must be paid. The passage of time does not negate the obligation of states to pay for their crimes. The latter two points address immediate steps that can and must be taken at the level of international public policy to save millions of African lives and to reverse the severe impoverishment of African peoples that has resulted from historical and contemporary international racism.

The global AIDS pandemic is indeed a matter of international racism. The AIDS crisis, whose epicenter is in Africa, is the harvest of an international system of global apartheid, where the consequences of racism, slavery, and colonialism have, five centuries on, impoverished the African continent and left it on its own to combat what is now the worst plague in all of human history.

The summit on racism should recognize that the resolution of the global AIDS pandemic is directly dependent upon the international fight against racism. It is the devaluation of black lives that has enabled the Western world to turn its eyes away from this global health crisis. And of all of the struggles that will be appropriately discussed in Durban, none has farther-reaching consequences than the future of our common humanity. The Global Fund for AIDS that the United Nations is attempting to develop as a vehicle to deliver the resources needed to defeat

AIDS has received a mere pittance of its already conservatively estimated budget of \$10 billion per year.

The U.S. will not escape the consequences of racism and colonialism no matter what course the government chooses. Both the official Durban

conference, and the equally important NGO forum, will air these matters as they should. The U.S. could help show the world that it is willing to confront its past, and present, if it would use the Durban forum to pledge a \$3 billion contribution to

the Global Fund to combat HIV/AIDS.

*(Salih Booker
<booker@africapolicy.org> is the executive director of Africa Action and a Board member of Foreign Policy In Focus.)*

Who's Who in the Bush Administration

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

Essays Include:

Robert Cutler
Karen Hansen-Kuhn
Chris Hellman
Neil Hicks
Chris Toensing
Tomas Valasek
Carol Welch
Ian Williams

A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia
Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express
What Can We Expect from the Penatagon?
The Bush Administration and Human Rights
Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors
George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe
Republican Rule and the IFIs
The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush

And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
Paul O'Neill
Richard N. Perle
Colin Powell
Condoleezza Rice
Donald Rumsfeld
George Schultz
Paul Wolfowitz
Ann Veneman
Robert B. Zoellick